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Review of *Marx for Cats* by Leigh Claire La Berge (Duke University Press)

by Rachael Mulvihill | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Leigh Claire La Berge's *Marx for Cats* reimagines the history of capitalism by analyzing archival documentation about felines. By updating bestiaries to include contemporary criticism of capitalism, La Berge positions cats as the key to an economic revolution. While the title and cover suggest a playful, possibly unserious analysis, La Berge carefully constructs a detailed history from feudalism to capitalism to point readers toward an animal-friendly future that reconsiders power structures and dares to imagine a world beyond capitalism.

KEYWORDS Marxism, animal studies, capitalism, class, cultural studies, ecocriticism, revolution

Marx for Cats: A Radical Bestiary. By Leigh Claire La Berge. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023, 408 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4780-1925-1. US List: $27.95.

Are cats comrades? Leigh Claire La Berge poses this humorous question with full sincerity in her book, *Marx for Cats*. The book offers an eclectic approach to rethinking and reshaping the history of capitalism by placing cats at the forefront of that history alongside humans. Drawing from Marxist traditions and engaging what she calls the "feline archive" (2), La Berge urges readers to take a utopian "leap of faith" (335) toward an interspecies revolution, one that not only draws from historical references of cats in the shaping of "labor, money, and class struggle" (9), but that places cats at the forefront of a worker's revolution alongside humans. La Berge's book demonstrates how, by the twentieth century,

“cats emerge as potent symbols against capitalism domination” (254), with wildcats associated with strikes and insurrections and the domestic black cat aligned with workers’ “energy and power” (161) to stage rebellion against oppressive capitalist regimes.

As a cat owner and student of utopian studies, I approached *Marx for Cats* with an open mind and was instantly charmed by the plethora of cat photographs littered throughout La Berge’s book. Broken down into four sections organized through dialectics and arranged in the form of a “*radical* bestiary,” La Berge uses archival drawings, poem, and photos—such as the image of a human fist raised in the air alongside a cat paw—to nudge both newbies and established scholars to a view that “takes animals seriously” (14). La Berge’s “radicalness” lies in how she subverts or transforms the tradition of bestiaries to dismantle contemporary power structures. In simple terms, *Marx for Cats* is a utopian text that reveals the revolutionary work that felines—lion, panther, tiger, lynx, and domestic cat alike—have achieved, from feudalism to capitalism.

Beginning with the feudal period, La Berge’s first section, “Menace and Menagerie,” details how lions became symbols of power and empire while the domestic cat became associated with “elements of social disorder” (53). She calls this the “lion-cat dialectic,” thus reframing the history of capitalism through the domestic cat. While the lion represents productivity under capitalism, the domestic cat represents the lowest of the class order. Aligned with the devil, witchcraft, and everything “suspect” (75) the domestic cat symbolizes everyday forms of labor that are overlooked under capitalism. This initial dialectic establishes her overarching argument that by analyzing cats throughout history, we uncover realities and lived experiences that capitalism has deemed mundane and unimportant.

This idea carries over in part two, “Lion Kings.” Here she details the “tiger-tyger dialectic” as a reimagining of socialist thought alongside the image and symbol of

the tiger. To do so, La Berge introduces the notion of *tigersprung,* or the "tiger's leap." Adapted from Walter Benjamin, La Berge posits "the tiger's leap" as a jump back in history that enables a reordering of the present and future. In other words, the tiger acts as a landing spot in history to offer a fresh look at capitalism. The best example La Berge offers is the leap made during the Haitian Revolution. In La Berge's words, the revolution "leapt up through the collective consciousness of a group of radical tigers" and yet went largely unrecognized by historians until C.L.R. James reconstructed it "through the archive of the tiger" (169). By analyzing "spacing, capitalization, and repetition" (169) of tigers in speeches and journals from revolutionaries like Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, James highlighted how the leap was important for social change. La Berge picks up this conversation. She argues that histories "silenced, overlooked, and destroyed" (169) by capitalism and racism can be revived through the image of the tiger. For La Berge, the tiger, when aligned with Marxist history, has the power to inspire a real-world utopia.

Part three, "The Feline Call to Freedom," and part four, "Our Dumb Beasts" discuss the "cat-mouth dialectic" and the "cat-comrade dialectic" respectively. Each chapter within these section offers a critique of unregulated capitalism and aligns cats with forces of liberation. La Berge argues that by the mid-nineteenth century, cats were used to realize, stabilize, and critique "money, technology, control of land, and forms of culture" (179–80). She offers the wildcat as a historical example, and details the ways in which violence toward wildcats provided both concrete economic opportunities and, in the abstract, symbolized concerns for the welfare of children, factory workers, slaves, and animals arising from the Industrial Revolution. La Berge then returns to her argument about the leap and reasserts the importance of feline visibility with more archival material such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "The Masque of Anarchy," drawing attention once more to the "lives and doings [that] remain invisible" (197). Shelley's poem drives La Berge's point that animals, namely cats, have been

aligned with anarchist, revolutionary ideologies throughout capitalism's long history.

It is important to note that while La Berge focuses on lions, tiger, and wildcats, she also draws attention to other animals, like the dog. She contends that a reimagining of capitalism must include moral respect for all animals. Some readers might groan at her push for vegetarianism, but La Berge's passionate detailing of a future that respects wildlife's habitats is compelling: instead of imagining ruin, La Berge urges readers to change their imagination and leap toward interspecies Marxism. Towards that end, the book demonstrates how, by the twentieth century, "cats emerge as potent symbols against capitalism domination" (254), with wildcats associated with strikes and insurrections and the domestic black cat aligned with workers' "energy and power" (161) to stage rebellion against oppressive capitalist regimes.

While the length of the chapters might discourage novice readers, La Berge's text is an important starting point for Marxist scholars, cultural theorists, and animal studies scholars to think beyond the limitations of capitalism. Ultimately, the book acts as a guide toward a better future: a future that places felines at the forefront of economic revolution, paw-in-hand with humans.

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Rachael Mulvihill is a PhD Candidate in Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research examines utopian and dystopian representations of capitalism across contemporary fiction, film, and media. She focuses on how these narrative forms imagine, critique, or reproduce the socio-economic logics of neoliberalism, revealing how capitalism conditions embodiment, labor, and

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